

A passion for writing

*Writer of psychological thrillers, crime novels and historical sagas,
Victoria Kingston talks to Winston Graham in his Sussex home*

If you're not a particularly bookish person, perhaps you won't know of the huge diversity of novels by master storyteller Winston Graham; perhaps you won't have read his Cornish romances, his tense thrillers, or realise that he wrote the novel *Marnie* which became an Alfred Hitchcock movie starring Sean Connery and Tippi Hedren. But certainly, you will know the *Poldark* novels, if not in print, then in the long running, phenomenally popular BBC series which spanned the 1970's. Winston Graham, a resident of East Sussex for the past 30 years, has had a love affair with Cornwall that has lasted all his life and inspired some of his greatest work.

Born in Manchester, he moved to Cornwall at age 17 because his father's illness necessitated an early retirement. Young Winston listened to the fishermen, the old miners, the tales of smuggling. The countryside enchanted him and the people fascinated him. "I don't know whether the eccentrics make Cornwall what it is, or whether Cornwall makes the eccentrics what they are," he told me.

Writing was always his vocation. "I never wanted to do anything else," he says. "I wanted to tell stories. When I was at school, I won a prize or two and when we moved to Cornwall, I began writing seriously." Two years after the move, when Winston was only 19 his father died. "I had been an ailing youth, so my mother staked me in my choice of writing as a career. It was a wonderful act of faith on her part. "His first novel was published when he was 23, and made no money, but the publishers still regarded him as a good prospect.

Winston married Jean in 1939 and his writing continued. Then just after the war, he wrote a film script, *Take My Life* which was bought by Rank Studios. He was called to London and hadn't enough ration coupons to buy a decent suit. Resourcefully, Jean went to Petticoat Lane and bought him one from a market stall. This was the start of his successful career. With the publication of the first *Poldark* novel, *Ross Poldark*, he had the obligatory flat in London, the secretary, the big car. But the trappings of success were only secondary. "The self-discipline is important," he says. "You need to drive yourself all the time."

The *Poldark* novels were a huge success - he wrote 11 in all - and they sold well for some years before the BBC approached him about a series. In a strange situation of life imitating art, Winston was writing the 6th and 7th books, while the BBC were filming the 2nd. Millions of people tuned in each week to see Robin Ellis and Angharad Rees in an absorbing and romantic love story, with a staggeringly beautiful Cornish backdrop. The BBC wanted more - and more. Winston told me: "They wanted me to keep writing them, but I couldn't do it. The books all came from inside me. They were not contrived." Soon after, the sale of video recordings of the series broke all records, and the *Poldark* Appreciation Society was formed, and still has a large membership. The Cornish locals also got caught up in the enthusiasm. Knowing that Winston had based a portion of the plot on historical facts, they all wanted their own ancestors to feature in the books, even if that meant claiming the villains of the piece! "I heard of two prominent Cornish families who were arguing about which of their forefathers were the model for the *Warleggans*," Winston says with a smile.

Despite his deep love for Cornwall, the Grahams retired to the South of France, but Winston says: "We didn't put down any roots there. We decided to try Sussex; my wife Jean had bad asthma and it cleared up in the Sussex air, so we settled here. We've lived here for 30 years." Winston's latest novel, *The Ugly Sister*, set just after the Napoleonic wars, is a moving story of Emma Spry who is born with a facial deformity which threatens to wreck all her chances of finding a good husband. Her beautiful sister is the favoured one, and her mother's ambitions lie in her own theatrical aspirations. The novel is written with unflinching honesty and perceptiveness, lyrically depicting the beautiful Cornish landscape that he knows so well.

What is so intriguing in *The Ugly Sister* is that he writes it in the first person, with Emma telling the narrative, thus entering into the internal world of the female mind, something not always done successfully by male authors, but nothing new for Winston Graham. "I like women's company," he says. "And I enjoy listening to them. I am also fascinated by the first person narrative. In *Marnie* it was important to use this because I could betray her without telling the reader her psychological flaws. I was a third of the way through it and I suddenly found it awkward to write about the man/woman relationship, so I abandoned it and wrote it in the third person. I was then writing what she did, and I found it lost its immediacy and insight. I felt I was too much outside of what was happening. So I went back to the first person narrative and it worked much better this time." He also used the technique for *The Walking Stick*, a novel that was a great commercial success and eventually a film starring Sammantha Eggart and David Hemmings.

In *The Ugly Sister*, the house in which the girl grows up is part of the fabric of the novel - and it's a real house. "I'd been looking at Place House at St Mawr's for 60 years. I'd seen it empty, seen it during the war - it's a gothic, slightly sinister house. A few years ago, I went to lunch with the Spry family, and I thought I could use their house as a model, but change the name, as Daphne Du Maurier did in *Rebecca*. Instead, they said I could use their ancestors and the real names. So the main story is mine, but I use some real people. I had to choose the year in which to set it - and I'm interested in the development of steam in the 1830's, so I chose Emma's birthday as 1812."

It is hard to imagine a writer with more diversity of material to his name, Winston Graham has written psychological thrillers, crime novels and historical sagas, all of which he enjoys. "I like change. I always find the impulse to write again if I write something different. The thriller has a strong structure, with taut sentences. With something like *Poldark*, it's a different technique - you can spread yourself more." In every sense, he has become a great storyteller, a modern classic. He is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and in 1983, he was awarded the OBE. At the same time, he is very modest, a man of quiet humour, somewhat bemused by the fame he has acquired through the writing he loves.

With such diversity in his repertoire, where will he go next, I asked him. "I like to take time off," he admitted. "At the moment, I'm an empty well." I pointed out that he could go anywhere he liked from this point. "Yes," he said. "That's true. But what I don't want to do is go nowhere." Somehow, I find that prospect very unlikely.

*In every sense,
he has become a
great storyteller,
a modern classic*